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Epistle to a Friend



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E P I S T L E

T O

A F R I E N D,

ON THE DEATH OF

J O H N T H O R N T O N, Esq.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

*"AN EPISTLE TO AN EMINENT PAINTER."*

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CUJUS EGO INTERITU TOTA DE MENTE FUGAVI  
HÆC STUDIA, ATQUE OMNES DELICIAS ANIMI.

— — — — —  
NOTESCATQUE MAGIS MORTUUS ATQUE MAGIS.

CATULLUS.

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L O N D O N :

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E P I S T L E, &c.

**I**N vain, dear Monitor, thy kind desire  
To wake the embers of poetic fire !  
To clear the mind, where Grief's dark shadows lower,  
And Fancy dies by Sorrow's freezing power !  
In vain would Friendship's cheering voice suggest 5  
Her flattering visions to the Poet's breast ;  
That public favor calls, with just demand,  
Th' expected volume from his lingering hand :  
Lost are those anxious hopes, that eager pride,  
With thee, my THORNTON, they declin'd, they died. 10

B

Friend

Friend of my opening soul! whose love began  
 To hail thy Poet, ere he rank'd as man !  
 Whose praise, like dew-drops, which the early morn  
 Sheds with mild virtue on the vernal thorn,  
 Taught his young mind each swell of thought to shew, 15  
 And gave the germs of fancy strength to blow !  
 Dear, firm associate of his studious hour,  
 Who led his idler step to Learning's bower !  
 Tho' young, imparting to his giddier youth  
 Thy thirst of science, and thy zeal for truth ! 20

Ye towers of Granta, where our friendship grew,  
 And that pure mind expanded to my view,  
 Our love fraternal let thy walls attest,  
 Where Attic joys our letter'd evening blest ;  
 Where midnight, from the chains of sleep reliev'd, 25  
 Stole on our social studies unperceiv'd !



But not, my THORNTON! in that calm alone  
 Was thy mild genius, thy warm virtue known :  
 When manhood mark'd the hour for busy strife,  
 And led us to the crowded maze of life, 30  
 From whence to sweet retirement's soothing shade,  
 Love and the Muse thy willing friend convey'd ;  
 Thy soul, more firm to join the struggling crowd,  
 To nobler Themis toilsome homage vow'd,  
 With zeal, devoting to her sacred throne 35  
 A heart as uncorrupted as her own.  
 Still as thy mind, with manly powers endued,  
 The opening path of active life pursued,  
 And round the ripening field of business rang'd,  
 Thy heart, unwarp'd, unharden'd, unestrang'd, 40  
 To early friendship still retain'd its truth,  
 With all the warm integrity of youth.

Whene'er affliction's force thy friend oppress,  
 Thou wer't the rock on which his cares might rest ;  
 From thy kind words his rising hopes would own      45  
 The charm of reason in affection's tone.

Where is the soothing voice of equal power,  
 To take it's anguish from the present hour ?  
 Beneath the pressure of a grief so just,  
 The lenient aid of books in vain I trust:      50

They, that could once the war of thought controul,  
 And banish discord from the jarring soul,  
 Now irritate the mind, they used to heal,  
 They speak too loudly of the loss I feel.

Thou faithful censor of the Poet's strain,      55  
 No more shalt thou his sinking hope sustain,  
 No more, with ardent zeal's enlivening fire,  
 Call from inglorious shades his silent lyre :



No more, as in our days of pleasure past,  
 The eye of judgment o'er his labors cast ; 60  
 Keen to discern the blemishes, that lurk  
 In the loose texture of his growing work ;  
 Eager to praise, yet resolute to blame,  
 Kind to his verse, but kinder to his fame.

How may the Muse, who prosper'd by thy care, 65  
 Now meet the public eye without despair?  
 Now, if harsh censures on her failings pour,  
 Her warmest advocate can speak no more :  
 Cold are those lips, which breath'd the kind defence,  
 If spleen's proud cavil strain'd her tortur'd sense ; 70  
 Which bade her song to public praise aspire,  
 And call'd attention to her trembling lyre.  
 Ah ! could she now, thus petrified with grief,  
 Find in some lighter lay a vain relief,

Still must she deem such verse, if such could be, 75

A wound to friendship, and a crime to thee ;

Profanely utter'd at this sacred time,

When thy pale corse demands her plaintive rhyme,

And Virtue, weeping whom she could not save,

Calls the just mourner to thy recent grave. 80

Hail hallow'd vault ! whose darksome caverns hold

A frame, though mortal, of no common mould ;

A heart scarce sullied with a human flaw,

Which shun'd no duty, and transgress'd no law ;

In joy still guarded, in distress serene, 85

Thro' life a model of the golden mean,

Which friendship only led him to transgress,

Whose purer spirit sanctifies excess.

Pure mind ! whose meekness, in thy mortal days,

Pursuing virtue, still retir'd from praise ; 90

Nor

Nor wish'd that friendship should on marble give

That perfect image of thy worth to live,

Which 'twas thy aim alone to leave impress'd

On the close tablet of her faithful breast.

If now her verse against thy wish rebel,

95

And strive to blazon, what she lov'd so well,

Forgive the tender thought, the moral song,

Which would thy virtues to the world prolong ;

That, rescued from the grave's oblivious shade,

Their useful lustre may be still survey'd,

100

Dear to the pensive eye of fond regret,

As light still beaming from a sun that's set.

Oft to our giddy Muse thy voice has taught

The just ambition of poetic thought ;

Bid her bold view to latest time extend,

105

And strive to make futurity her friend.

If

If any verse, her little art can frame,  
 May win the partial voice of distant fame,  
 Be it the verse, whose fond ambition tries  
 To paint thy mind in truth's unfading dyes, 110  
 Tho' firm, yet tender, ardent, yet refin'd ;  
 With Roman strength and Attic grace combin'd.

What tho' undeck'd with titles, power, and wealth,  
 Great were thy generous deeds, and done by stealth ;  
 For thy pure bounty from observance stole, 115  
 Nor wish'd applause, but from thy conscious soul.  
 Tho' thy plain tomb no sculptur'd form may shew,  
 No boastful witness of suspected woe ;  
 Yet heavenly shapes, that shun the glare of day,  
 To that dear spot shall nightly visits pay : 120  
 Pale Science there shall o'er her votary strew  
 Her flow'rs, yet moist with sorrow's recent dew.

There

There Charity, Compassion's lovely child,  
 In rustic notes pathetically wild,  
 With grateful blessings bid thy name endure, 125  
 And mourn the patron of her village-poor.  
 E'en from the midnight shew with music gay,  
 The soul of Beauty to thy tomb shall stray,  
 In sweet distraction steal from present mirth,  
 To sigh unnotic'd o'er the hallow'd earth, 130  
 Which hides those lips, that glow'd with tender fire,  
 And sung her praises to no common lyre :  
 But Friendship, wrapt in sorrow's deepest gloom,  
 Shall keep the longest vigils at thy tomb ;  
 Her wounded breast, disdainful of relief, 135  
 There claims a fond præminence in grief.

Short was thy life, but ah ! its thread how fine !  
 How pure the texture of the finish'd line !



What tho' thy opening manhood could not gain  
 Those late rewards, maturer toils attain ; 140  
 Hope's firmest promises 'twas thine to raise,  
 That merit's brightest meed would grace thy lengthen'd days ;  
 For thine were Judgment's patient powers, to draw  
 Entangled justice from the nets of law ;  
 Thine firm Integrity, whose language clear 145  
 Ne'er swell'd with arrogance, or shook with fear.  
 Reason's mild power, unvex'd by mental strife,  
 Sway'd the calm current of thy useful life ;  
 Whose even course was in no season lost,  
 Nor rough with storms, nor stagnated by frost. 150  
 In scenes of public toil, or social ease,  
 'Twas thine by firm sincerity to please ;  
 Sweet as the breath of spring thy converse flow'd,  
 As summer's noon-tide warmth thy friendship glow'd.

O'er



O'er thy mild manners, by no art constrain'd, 155

A pensive, pleasing melancholy reign'd,

Which won regard, and charm'd th' attentive eye,

Like the soft lustre of an evening sky :

Yet if perchance excited to defend

The injur'd merit of an absent friend, 160

That gentle spirit, rous'd to virtuous ire,

Indignant flash'd resentment's noble fire.

Tho' just observance in thy life may trace

A lovely model of each moral grace,

Thy last of days the noblest lesson taught : 165

Severe instruction ! and too dearly bought !

Whose force from memory never can depart,

But while it mends, must agonize the heart.

Tho' thy shrunk nerves were destin'd to sustain

Th' increasing horrors of flow-wasting pain ; 170

Those spirit-quenching pangs, whose base controul  
 Cloud the clear temper, and exhaust the soul ;  
 Yet in that hour, when Death asserts his claim,  
 And his strong summons shakes the conscious frame ;  
 When weaker minds, by frantic fear o'erthrown, 175  
 Shrink in wild horror from the dread Unknown,  
 Thy firmer soul, with Christian strength renew'd,  
 Nor lost in languor, nor by pain subdued,  
 (While thy cold grasp the hand of Friendship prest,  
 And her vain aid in fault'ring accents blest) 180  
 With awe, but not as Superstition's slave,  
 Survey'd the gathering shadows of the grave ;  
 And to thy God, in death, devoutly paid  
 That calm obedience which thy life display'd.

Thou friend ! yet left me of the choicer few, 185  
 Whom grief's fond eyes with growing love review ;

O thou !

O thou ! whom mutual sorrow will incline  
 To mix thy sympathetic sighs with mine ;  
 Still be it ours to pay, with just regret,  
 At Friendship's sacred shrine our common debt !      190  
 Tho' doom'd (so Heaven ordains) to see no more  
 The gentle Being, whom we both deplore ;  
 Painting shall still, sweet soothing art ! supply  
 A form so precious in affection's eye.  
 Ah ! little thought we, in that happier hour,      195  
 When our gay Muse rehears'd the Pencil's power ;  
 To mourn that form in cold obstruction laid,  
 And see him only by the pencil's aid !  
 Blest be that pencil, every art be blest,  
 That stamps his image deeper on our breast !      200

Oft let us loiter on his favourite hill,  
 Whose shades the sadly-pleasing thought instill ;

Recount his kindness, as we fondly rove,  
And meet his spirit in the lonely grove.

At evening's pensive hour, or opening day, 205

He yet shall seem the partner of our way.

Blest Spirit ! still thro' fancy's ear impart

The calm of virtue, to the troubled heart !

Correct each fordid view, each vain desire,

And touch the mortal, with celestial fire ! 210

So may we still, in this dark scene of earth,

Hold sweet communion with thy living worth ;

And, while our purer thoughts thy merit scan,

Revere the Angel, as we lov'd the Man.

*F I N I S.*

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